

***LESLIE
STEPHEN***



SWIFT

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Swift

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PREFACE.

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The chief materials for a life of Swift are to be found in his writings and correspondence. The best edition is the second of the two edited by Scott (1814 and 1824).

In 1751 Lord Orrery published *Remarks upon the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift*. Orrery, born 1707, had known Swift from about 1732. His remarks give the views of a person of quality of more ambition than capacity, and more anxious to exhibit his own taste than to give full or accurate information.

In 1754, Dr. Delany published *Observations upon Lord Orrery's Remarks*, intended to vindicate Swift against some of Orrery's severe judgments. Delany, born about 1685, became intimate with Swift soon after the dean's final settlement in Ireland. He was then one of the authorities of Trinity College, Dublin. He is the best contemporary authority, so far as he goes.

In 1756 Deane Swift, grandson of Swift's uncle Godwin, and son-in-law to Swift's cousin and faithful guardian, Mrs. Whiteway, published an *Essay upon the Life, Writings, and Character of Dr. Jonathan Swift*, in which he attacks both his predecessors. Deane Swift, born about 1708, had seen little or nothing of his cousin till the year 1738, when the dean's faculties were decaying. His book is foolish and discursive. Deane Swift's son, Theophilus, communicated a good deal of doubtful matter to Scott, on the authority of family tradition.

In 1765 Hawkesworth, who had no personal knowledge, prefixed a life of Swift to an edition of the works which adds nothing to our information. In 1781 Johnson, when publishing a very perfunctory life of Swift as one of the poets, excused its shortcomings on the ground of having already communicated his thoughts to Hawkesworth. The life is not only meagre but injured by one of Johnson's strong prejudices.

In 1785 Thomas Sheridan produced a pompous and dull life of Swift. He was the son of Swift's most intimate companion during the whole period subsequent to the final settlement in Ireland. The elder Sheridan, however, died in 1738; and the younger, born in 1721, was still a boy when Swift was becoming imbecile.

Contemporary writers, except Delany, have thus little authority; and a number of more or less palpably fictitious anecdotes accumulated round their hero. Scott's life, originally published in 1814, is defective in point of accuracy. Scott did not investigate the evidence minutely, and liked a good story too well to be very particular about its authenticity. The book, however, shows his strong sense and genial appreciation of character; and remains, till this day, by far the best account of Swift's career.

A life which supplies Scott's defects in great measure was given by William Monck Mason, in 1819, in his *History and Antiquities of the Church of St. Patrick*. Monck Mason was an indiscriminate admirer, and has a provoking method of expanding undigested information into monstrous notes, after the precedent of Bayle. But he examined facts with the

utmost care, and every biographer must respect his authority.

In 1875 Mr. Forster published the first instalment of a *Life of Swift*. This book, which contains the results of patient and thorough inquiry, was unfortunately interrupted by Mr. Forster's death, and ends at the beginning of 1711. A complete *Life* by Mr. Henry Craik is announced as about to appear.

Besides these books, I ought to mention an *Essay upon the Earlier Part of the Life of Swift*, by the Rev. John Barrett, B.D. and Vice-Provost of Trin. Coll. Dublin (London, 1808); and *The Closing Years of Dean Swift's Life*, by W. R. Wilde, M.R.I.A., F.R.C.S. (Dublin, 1849). This last is a very interesting study of the medical aspects of Swift's life. An essay by Dr. Bucknill, in *Brain* for Jan. 1882, is a remarkable contribution to the same subject.

CHAPTER I.

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EARLY YEARS.

Jonathan Swift, the famous Dean of St. Patrick's, was the descendant of an old Yorkshire family. One branch had migrated southwards, and in the time of Charles I., Thomas Swift, Jonathan's grandfather, was Vicar of Goodrich, near Ross, in Herefordshire, a fact commemorated by the sweetest singer of Queen Ann's reign in the remarkable lines—

Jonathan Swift
Had the gift
By fatherige, motherige,
And by brotherige,
To come from Gotheridge.

Thomas Swift married Elizabeth Dryden, niece of Sir Erasmus, the grandfather of the poet Dryden. By her he became the father of ten sons and four daughters. In the great rebellion he distinguished himself by a loyalty which was the cause of obvious complacency to his descendant. On one occasion he came to the governor of a town held for the king, and being asked what he could do for his Majesty, laid down his coat as an offering. The governor remarked that his coat was worth little. "Then," said Swift, "take my waistcoat." The waistcoat was lined with three hundred broad pieces—a handsome offering from a poor and plundered clergyman. On another occasion he armed a ford,

through which rebel cavalry were to pass, by certain pieces of iron with four spikes, so contrived that one spike must always be uppermost (*caltrops*, in short). Two hundred of the enemy were destroyed by this stratagem. The success of the rebels naturally led to the ruin of this cavalier clergyman; and the record of his calamities forms a conspicuous article in Walker's *Sufferings of the Clergy*. He died in 1658, before the advent of the better times in which he might have been rewarded for his loyal services. His numerous family had to struggle for a living. The eldest son, Godwin Swift, was a barrister of Gray's Inn at the time of the Restoration: he was married four times, and three times to women of fortune; his first wife had been related to the Ormond family; and this connexion induced him to seek his fortune in Ireland—a kingdom which at that time suffered, amongst other less endurable grievances, from a deficient supply of lawyers.^[1] Godwin Swift was made Attorney-General in the palatinate of Tipperary by the Duke of Ormond. He prospered in his profession, in the subtle parts of which, says his nephew, he was “perhaps a little too dexterous;” and he engaged in various speculations, having at one time what was then the very large income of 3000*l.* a year. Four brothers accompanied this successful Godwin, and shared to some extent in his prosperity. In January, 1666, one of these, Jonathan, married to Abigail Erick, of Leicester, was appointed to the stewardship of the King's Inns, Dublin, partly in consideration of the loyalty and suffering of his family. Some fifteen months later, in April, 1667, he died, leaving his widow with an infant daughter, and seven months after her husband's death, November 30,

1667, she gave birth to Jonathan, the younger, at 7, Hoey's Court, Dublin.

The Dean "hath often been heard to say" (I quote his fragment of autobiography) "that he felt the consequences of that (his parents') marriage, not only through the whole course of his education, but during the greater part of his life." This quaint assumption that a man's parentage is a kind of removable accident to which may be attributed a limited part of his subsequent career, betrays a characteristic sentiment. Swift cherished a vague resentment against the fates which had mixed bitter ingredients in his lot. He felt the place as well as the circumstances of his birth to be a grievance. It gave a plausibility to the offensive imputation that he was of Irish blood. "I happened," he said, with a bitterness born of later sufferings, "by a perfect accident to be born here, and thus I am a Teague, or an Irishman, or what people please." Elsewhere he claims England as properly his own country; "although I happened to be dropped here, and was a year old before I left it (Ireland), and to my sorrow did not die before I came back to it." His infancy brought fresh grievances. He was, it seems, a precocious and delicate child, and his nurse became so much attached to him, that having to return to her native Whitehaven, she kidnapped the year-old infant out of pure affection. When his mother knew her loss, she was afraid to hazard a return voyage until the child was stronger; and he thus remained nearly three years at Whitehaven, where the nurse took such care of his education, that he could read any chapter in the Bible before he was three years old. His return must have been

speedily followed by his mother's departure for her native Leicester. Her sole dependence, it seems, was an annuity of 20*l.* a year, which had been bought for her by her husband upon their marriage. Some of the Swift family seem also to have helped her; but for reasons not now discoverable, she found Leicester preferable to Dublin, even at the price of parting from the little Jonathan. Godwin took him off her hands and sent him to Kilkenny School at the age of six, and from that early period the child had to grow up as virtually an orphan. His mother through several years to come can have been little more than a name to him. Kilkenny School, called the "Eton of Ireland," enjoyed a high reputation. Two of Swift's most famous contemporaries were educated there. Congreve, two years his junior, was one of his schoolfellows, and a warm friendship remained when both had become famous. Fourteen years after Swift had left the school it was entered by George Berkeley, destined to win a fame of the purest and highest kind, and to come into a strange relationship to Swift. It would be vain to ask what credit may be claimed by Kilkenny School for thus "producing" (it is the word used on such occasions) the greatest satirist, the most brilliant writer of comedies, and the subtlest metaphysician in the English language. Our knowledge of Swift's experiences at this period is almost confined to a single anecdote. "I remember," he says incidentally in a letter to Lord Bolingbroke, "when I was a little boy, I felt a great fish at the end of my line, which I drew up almost on the ground; but it dropped in, and the disappointment vexes me to this very day, and I believe it was the type of all my future disappointments."[\[2\]](#)

Swift, indeed, was still in the schoolboy stage, according to modern ideas, when he was entered at Trinity College, Dublin, on the same day, April 24, 1682, with a cousin, Thomas Swift. Swift clearly found Dublin uncongenial; though there is still a wide margin for uncertainty as to precise facts. His own account gives a short summary of his academic history:—

“By the ill-treatment of his nearest relations” (he says) “he was so discouraged and sunk in his spirits that he too much neglected his academic studies, for some parts of which he had no great relish by nature, and turned himself to reading history and poetry, so that when the time came for taking his degree of Bachelor of Arts, although he had lived with great regularity and due observance of the statutes, he was stopped of his degree for dulness and insufficiency; and at last hardly admitted in a manner little to his credit, which is called in that college *speciali gratia*.” In a report of one of the college examinations, discovered by Mr. Forster, he receives a *bene* for his Greek and Latin, a *male* for his “philosophy,” and a *negligenter* for his theology. The “philosophy” was still based upon the old scholasticism, and proficiency was tested by skill in the arts of syllogistic argumentation. Sheridan, son of Swift’s intimate friend, was a student at Dublin shortly before the Dean’s loss of intellectual power; the old gentleman would naturally talk to the lad about his university recollections; and, according to his hearer, remembered with singular accuracy the questions upon which he had disputed, and repeated the arguments which had been used, “in syllogistic form.” Swift at the same time declared, if the report be accurate, that he

never had the patience to read the pages of Smiglecius, Burgersdicius, and the other old-fashioned logical treatises. When told that they taught the art of reasoning, he declared that he could reason very well without it. He acted upon this principle in his exercises, and left the Proctor to reduce his argument to the proper form. In this there is probably a substratum of truth. Swift can hardly be credited, as Berkeley might have been, with a precocious perception of the weakness of the accepted system. When young gentlemen are plucked for their degree, it is not generally because they are in advance of their age. But the aversion to metaphysics was characteristic of Swift through life. Like many other people who have no turn for such speculations, he felt for them a contempt which may perhaps be not the less justified because it does not arise from familiarity. The bent of his mind was already sufficiently marked to make him revolt against the kind of mental food which was most in favour at Dublin; though he seems to have obtained a fair knowledge of the classics.

Swift cherished through life a resentment against most of his relations. His uncle Godwin had undertaken his education, and had sent him, as we see, to the best places of education in Ireland. If the supplies became scanty, it must be admitted that poor Godwin had a sufficient excuse. Each of his four wives had brought him a family—the last leaving him seven sons; his fortunes had been dissipated, chiefly, it seems, by means of a speculation in iron-works; and the poor man himself seems to have been failing, for he “fell into a lethargy” in 1688, surviving some five years, like his famous nephew, in a state of imbecility. Decay of mind

and fortune coinciding with the demands of a rising family might certainly be some apology for the neglect of one amongst many nephews. Swift did not consider it sufficient. "Was it not your uncle Godwin," he was asked "who educated you?" "Yes," said Swift, after a pause; "he gave me the education of a dog." "Then," answered the intrepid inquirer, "you have not the gratitude of a dog." And perhaps that is our natural impression. Yet we do not know enough of the facts to judge with confidence. Swift, whatever his faults, was always a warm and faithful friend; and perhaps it is the most probable conjecture that Godwin Swift bestowed his charity coldly and in such a way as to hurt the pride of the recipient. In any case, it appears that Swift showed his resentment in a manner more natural than reasonable. The child is tempted to revenge himself by knocking his head against the rock which has broken his shins; and with equal wisdom the youth who fancies that the world is not his friend, tries to get satisfaction by defying its laws. Till the time of his degree (February, 1686), Swift had been at least regular in his conduct, and if the neglect of his relations had discouraged his industry, it had not provoked him to rebellion. During the three years which followed he became more reckless. He was still a mere lad, just eighteen at the time of his degree, when he fell into more or less irregular courses. In rather less than two years he was under censure for seventy weeks. The offences consisted chiefly in neglect to attend chapel and in "town-haunting" or absence from the nightly roll-call. Such offences perhaps appear to be more flagrant than they really are in the eyes of college authorities. Twice he got into more serious scrapes. He was

censured (March 16, 1687) along with his cousin, Thomas Swift, and several others for “notorious neglect of duties and frequenting ‘the town.’” And on his twenty-first birthday (Nov. 30, 1688) he^[3] was punished, along with several others, for exciting domestic dissensions, despising the warnings of the junior dean, and insulting that official by contemptuous words. The offenders were suspended from their degrees, and inasmuch as Swift and another were the worst offenders (*adhuc intolerabilius se gesserant*), they were sentenced to ask pardon of the dean upon their knees publicly in the hall. Twenty years later^[4] Swift revenged himself upon Owen Lloyd, the junior dean, by accusing him of infamous servility. For the present Swift was probably reckoned amongst the black sheep of the academic flock.^[5]

This censure came at the end of Swift’s university career. The three last years had doubtless been years of discouragement and recklessness. That they were also years of vice in the usual sense of the word is not proved; nor, from all that we know of Swift’s later history, does it seem to be probable. There is no trace of anything like licentious behaviour in his whole career. It is easier to believe with Scott that Swift’s conduct at this period might be fairly described in the words of Johnson when speaking of his own university experience: “Ah, sir, I was mad and violent. It was bitterness that they mistook for frolic. I was miserably poor, and I thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit; so I disregarded all power and all authority.” Swift learnt another and a more profitable lesson in these years. It is indicated in an anecdote which rests upon tolerable authority. One day, as he was gazing in

melancholy mood from his window, his pockets at their lowest ebb, he saw a sailor staring about in the college courts. How happy should I be, he thought, if that man was inquiring for me with a present from my cousin Willoughby! The dream came true. The sailor came to his rooms and produced a leather bag, sent by his cousin from Lisbon, with more money than poor Jonathan had ever possessed in his life. The sailor refused to take a part of it for his trouble, and Jonathan hastily crammed the money into his pocket, lest the man should repent of his generosity. From that time forward, he added, he became a better economist.

The Willoughby Swift here mentioned was the eldest son of Godwin, and now settled in the English factory at Lisbon. Swift speaks warmly of his “goodness and generosity” in a letter written to another cousin in 1694. Some help, too, was given by his uncle William, who was settled at Dublin, and whom he calls the “best of his relations.” In one way or another he was able to keep his head above water; and he was receiving an impression which grew with his growth. The misery of dependence was burnt into his soul. To secure independence became his most cherished wish; and the first condition of independence was a rigid practice of economy. We shall see hereafter how deeply this principle became rooted in his mind; here I need only notice that it is the lesson which poverty teaches to none but men of strong character.

A catastrophe meanwhile was approaching, which involved the fortunes of Swift along with those of nations. James II. had been on the throne for a year when Swift took his degree. At the time when Swift was ordered to kneel to

the junior dean, William was in England, and James preparing to fly from Whitehall. The revolution of 1688 meant a breaking up of the very foundations of political and social order in Ireland. At the end of 1688 a stream of fugitives was pouring into England, whilst the English in Ireland were gathering into strong places, abandoning their property to the bands of insurgent peasants.

Swift fled with his fellows. Any prospects which he may have had in Ireland were ruined with the ruin of his race. The loyalty of his grandfather to a king who protected the national church was no precedent for loyalty to a king who was its deadliest enemy. Swift, a Churchman to the backbone, never shared the leaning of many Anglicans to the exiled Stuarts; and his early experience was a pretty strong dissuasive from Jacobitism. He took refuge with his mother at Leicester. Of that mother we hear less than we could wish; for all that we hear suggests a brisk, wholesome, motherly body. She lived cheerfully and frugally on her pittance; rose early, worked with her needle, read her book, and deemed herself to be “rich and happy”—on twenty pounds a year. A touch of her son’s humour appears in the only anecdote about her. She came, it seems, to visit her son in Ireland shortly after he had taken possession of Laracor, and amused herself by persuading the woman with whom she lodged that Jonathan was not her son but her lover. Her son, though separated from her through the years in which filial affection is generally nourished, loved her with the whole strength of his nature; he wrote to her frequently, took pains to pay her visits “rarely less than once a year;” and was deeply affected by her death in 1710. “I have now

lost," he wrote in his pocket-book, "the last barrier between me and death. God grant I may be as well prepared for it as I confidently believe her to have been! If the way to Heaven be through piety, truth, justice, and charity, she is there."

The good lady had, it would seem, some little anxieties of the common kind about her son. She thought him in danger of falling in love with a certain Betty Jones, who, however, escaped the perils of being wife to a man of genius, and married an innkeeper. Some forty years later, Betty Jones, now Perkins, appealed to Swift to help her in some family difficulties, and Swift was ready to "sacrifice five pounds" for old acquaintance' sake. Other vague reports of Swift's attentions to women seem to have been flying about in Leicester. Swift, in noticing them, tells his correspondent that he values "his own entertainment beyond the obloquy of a parcel of wretched fools," which he "solemnly pronounces" to be a fit description of the inhabitants of Leicester. He had, he admits, amused himself with flirtation; but he has learnt enough, "without going half a mile beyond the University," to refrain from thoughts of matrimony. A "cold temper" and the absence of any settled outlook are sufficient dissuasives. Another phrase in the same letter is characteristic. "A person of great honour in Ireland (who was pleased to stoop so low as to look into my mind) used to tell me that my mind was like a conjured spirit that would do mischief if I did not give it employment." He allowed himself these little liberties, he seems to infer, by way of distraction for his restless nature. But some more serious work was necessary, if he was to win the independence so earnestly

desired, and to cease to be a burden upon his mother.
Where was he to look for help?



CHAPTER II.

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MOOR PARK AND KILROOT.

How was this “conjured spirit” to find occupation? The proverbial occupation of such beings is to cultivate despair by weaving ropes of sand. Swift felt himself strong; but he had no task worthy of his strength: nor did he yet know precisely where it lay: he even fancied that it might be in the direction of Pindaric Odes. Hitherto his energy had expended itself in the questionable shape of revolt against constituted authority. But the revolt, whatever its precise nature, had issued in the rooted determination to achieve a genuine independence. The political storm which had for the time crushed the whole social order of Ireland into mere chaotic anarchy, had left him an uprooted waif and stray—a loose fragment without any points of attachment, except the little household in Leicester. His mother might give him temporary shelter, but no permanent home. If, as is probable, he already looked forward to a clerical career, the Church to which he belonged was, for the time, hopelessly ruined, and in danger of being a persecuted sect.

In this crisis a refuge was offered to him. Sir William Temple was connected, in more ways than one, with the Swifts. He was the son of Sir John Temple, Master of the Rolls in Ireland, who had been a friend of Godwin Swift. Temple himself had lived in Ireland, in early days, and had known the Swift family. His wife was in some way related to Swift’s mother; and he was now in a position to help the young man. Temple is a remarkable figure amongst the statesmen

of that generation. There is something more modern about him than belongs to his century. A man of cultivated taste and cosmopolitan training, he had the contempt of enlightened persons for the fanaticisms of his times. He was not the man to suffer persecution, with Baxter, for a creed, or even to lose his head, with Russell, for a party. Yet if he had not the faith which animates enthusiasts, he sincerely held political theories—a fact sufficient to raise him above the thorough-going cynics of the court of the restoration. His sense of honour, or the want of robustness in mind and temperament, kept him aloof from the desperate game in which the politicians of the day staked their lives, and threw away their consciences as an incumbrance. Good fortune threw him into the comparatively safe line of diplomacy, for which his natural abilities fitted him. Good fortune, aided by discernment, enabled him to identify himself with the most respectable achievements of our foreign policy. He had become famous as the chief author of the Triple Alliance, and the promoter of the marriage of William and Mary. He had ventured far enough into the more troublous element of domestic politics to invent a highly applauded constitutional device for smoothing the relations between the crown and Parliament. Like other such devices it went to pieces at the first contact with realities. Temple retired to cultivate his garden and write elegant memoirs and essays, and refused all entreaties to join again in the rough struggles of the day. Associates, made of sterner stuff, probably despised him; but from their own, that is, the selfish point of view, he was perhaps entitled to laugh last. He escaped at least with unblemished honour, and enjoyed the cultivated retirement

which statesmen so often profess to desire, and so seldom achieve. In private, he had many estimable qualities. He was frank and sensitive; he had won diplomatic triumphs by disregarding the pedantry of official rules; and he had an equal, though not an equally intelligent, contempt for the pedantry of the schools. His style, though often slipshod, often anticipates the pure and simple English of the Addison period, and delighted Charles Lamb by its delicate flavour of aristocratic assumption. He had the vanity of a "person of quality,"—a lofty, dignified air which became his flowing periwig, and showed itself in his distinguished features. But in youth, a strong vein of romance displayed itself in his courtship of Lady Temple, and he seems to have been correspondingly worshipped by her, and his sister, Lady Giffard.

The personal friendship of William could not induce Temple to return to public life. His only son took office, but soon afterwards killed himself from a morbid sense of responsibility. Temple retired finally to Moor Park, near Farnham, in Surrey; and about the same time received Swift into his family. Long afterwards, John Temple, Sir William's nephew, who had quarrelled with Swift, gave an obviously spiteful account of the terms of this engagement. Swift, he said, was hired by Sir William to read to him and be his amanuensis, at the rate of 20*l.* a year and his board; but "Sir William never favoured him with his conversation, nor allowed him to sit down at table with him." The authority is bad, and we must be guided by rather precarious inferences in picturing this important period of Swift's career. The raw Irish student was probably awkward, and may have been

disagreeable in some matters. Forty years later, we find from his correspondence with Gay and the Duchess of Queensberry, that his views as to the distribution of functions between knives and forks were lamentably unsettled; and it is probable that he may in his youth have been still more heretical as to social conventions. There were more serious difficulties. The difference which separated Swift from Temple is not easily measurable. How can we exaggerate the distance at which a lad, fresh from college and a remote provincial society, would look up to the distinguished diplomatist of sixty, who had been intimate with the two last kings, and was still the confidential friend of the reigning king, who had been an actor in the greatest scenes, not only of English, but of European history, who had been treated with respect by the ministers of Louis XIV., and in whose honour bells had been rung, and banquets set forth as he passed through the great continental cities? Temple might have spoken to him, without shocking proprieties, in terms which, if I may quote the proverbial phrase, would be offensive “from God Almighty to a blackbeetle.”

Shall I believe a spirit so divine
Was cast in the same mould with mine?

is Swift’s phrase about Temple, in one of his first crude poems. We must not infer that circumstances which would now be offensive to an educated man—the seat at the second table, the predestined congeniality to the ladies’-maid of doubtful reputation—would have been equally offensive then. So long as dependence upon patrons was a

regular incident of the career of a poor scholar, the corresponding regulations would be taken as a matter of course. Swift was not necessarily more degraded by being a dependent of Temple's than Locke by a similar position in Shaftesbury's family. But it is true that such a position must always be trying, as many a governess has felt in more modern days. The position of the educated dependent must always have had its specific annoyances. At this period, when the relation of patron and client was being rapidly modified or destroyed, the compact would be more than usually trying to the power of forbearance and mutual kindness of the parties concerned. The relation between Sir Roger de Coverley and the old college friend who became his chaplain meant good feeling on both sides. When poor parson Supple became chaplain to Squire Western, and was liable to be sent back from London to Basingstoke in search of a forgotten tobacco-box, Supple must have parted with all self-respect. Swift has incidentally given his own view of the case in his *Essay on the Fates of Clergymen*. It is an application of one of his favourite doctrines—the advantage possessed by mediocrity over genius in a world so largely composed of fools. Eugenio, who represents Jonathan Swift, fails in life because as a wit and a poet he has not the art of winning patronage. Corusodes, in whom we have a partial likeness to Tom Swift, Jonathan's college contemporary, and afterwards the chaplain of Temple, succeeds by servile respectability. *He* never neglected chapel, or lectures: *he* never looked into a poem: never made a jest himself, or laughed at the jests of others: but he managed to insinuate himself into the favour of the noble family where his sister